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DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR
REVIEWED BY Ben Dietz DATE Jan 4 10
RDS ☐ or XDS ☐ EXT. DATE
TS AUTH. REASON (S)
ENDORSE EXISTING MARKINGS ☐
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PALESTINE REFUGEE PROBLEM

Resettlement of Arab Refugees

The following is a summary of information and advice about the possibility of resettling the Palestinian Arab refugees within the Middle East area, received from:-

(a) H.M. Missions in the Middle East;
(b) U.S. Missions in the Middle East;
(c) The Administrations of the Former Italian Colonies;
(d) The British Oil Companies;
(e) The British Middle East Office;
(f) The Sudan Government.

2. From the facts summarised in paragraphs 3-5 below the following conclusions may be drawn:

(a) Out of the 7-800,000 refugees there is likely to be a considerable "unresettleable core" of orphans and old and infirm people who will require relief for many years to come;

(b) Except in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the former Italian Colonies, the immediate settlement of the refugees is not likely to present any outstanding political difficulty in the various Arab States; from a longer-term point of view internal political difficulties may arise in connection with the question of introducing modern forms of land ownership and organisation in the areas to be re-settled;

(c) The short-term economic possibilities of absorption in the Arab countries are not promising. As a rough estimate about 100,000 refugees might be absorbed within the next two years. Funds from outside sources would, however, have to be provided to finance some of the projects involved.

(d) From a long-term point of view all the refugees could be absorbed in Transjordan, Syria and Iraq if development plans which have been or are now being prepared for these countries are carried out. As a very rough estimate at a total expenditure of £10 million on capital works and equipment these plans could enable resettlement to be completed in four or five years time.

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(e) The position may be summed up as follows:- Over half the refugees are in Transjordan, Transjordan-Administered Arab Palestine and Syria. If Transjordan and Syria can obtain assistance from outside sources in funds and capital equipment to carry out their development plans there is a reasonable prospect that these refugees can be gradually absorbed in these two countries. There is no possibility that the 200,000 or more refugees in the Gaza area of Arab Palestine (which is now administered by Egypt) can be absorbed into that country (though it is presumably just possible that the Egyptian Government's attitude might change if this area were to be incorporated in Egypt as the result of the eventual peace settlement in Palestine). Nor can the Lebanon absorb more than a very small proportion of the 120,000 refugees in her territory. Between 300 and 350 thousand refugees will, therefore, probably have to be cared for by outside relief for at least two or three years until land for their settlement becomes available in Iraq and Syria.

3. Description of the Refugees

It has not yet been possible for the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees to take a census of the refugees and no accurate estimate of their numbers are available. Reports from various sources place the total between seven and eight hundred thousand distributed as follows:-

Gaza area in Southern Palestine:

upwards of 200,000.

Transjordan

Transjordan-administered Arab Palestine)
300,000)

Lebanon 120,000
Syria 115,000 (of which 85,000 are cared for by the United Nations).

Iraq 20,000

Egypt (Kantara camp): 10,000

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About 70% are reported to be peasants, and the remainder urban types. About 70% of the total are women and children. It is not yet possible to estimate the size of the "unresettleable core" - i.e. orphans and old and infirm people with no wage-earner to support them - but some reports suggest that it may prove disproportionately large.

4. Attitude of the Arab Governments towards resettlement
Political Reactions

The Arab Governments necessarily regard the question of the resettlement of the refugees as part of the wider question of the whole political settlement with Israel. They have, in most cases, deliberately refrained from considering the possibilities of resettlement. It remains to be seen whether the Conciliation Commission, at the Conference which it has called for March 25th, can stimulate them into facing realities. Meanwhile two governments - those of Transjordan and Syria - are understood to be in principle willing to absorb the refugees at present in their countries, this would involve about half the total number, including those in Transjordan-administered Arab Palestine. If circumstances were to alter the present official Arab policy, which is to insist on repatriation, Iraq and Lebanon would probably agree in principle to accept a proportion of the refugees, although in the Lebanon there might be some opposition from the Christian minority and the Shias in Iraq might object to a large influx of Sunnis. Egypt and Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, will almost certainly oppose entry of the refugees in any circumstances - in the case of Egypt, on account of her own growing unemployment and social discontent and in the case of Saudi-Arabia on account of the political embarrassment which the presence of people used to British standards of administration and personal and political freedom would cause. There would also be political difficulties in accepting refugees in Cyrenaica and Eritrea (owing to xenophobia) and in Tripolitania (owing to the hostility of the local Italians). In general, in view of the backwardness and social instability of these countries, the settlement in them of any large numbers of refugees on terms which may involve the introduction of modern forms of land ownership and social organisation may present great political difficulties.

5. Economic possibilities of absorption:

(a) Short-term

The reports on the short-term possibilities of absorption are not encouraging. They may be summarised as follows:

Transjordan: 40,000 (including dependents) might be absorbed within two years on irrigation and settlement projects which could be put in hand at once if funds were forthcoming.

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The cost of the projects is estimated at about £600,000. Additional small numbers might be employed on road construction.

Tripolitania: 600 families - say 3,000 refugees - might be settled in Tripolitania. They would, however, require financial assistance for several years to come.

Saudi Arabia. Aramco could probably absorb about 1,000 skilled and unskilled workers - say 5,000 refugees, including dependents. Small numbers might be absorbed on other public works. The political opposition referred to above would, however, first have to be overcome.

Iraq: There is little scope for limited development projects.

Lebanon: Only very small numbers could be absorbed at present. There is considerable unemployment in the country now.

Syria: No great possibility of immediate absorption exists - there is at present some unemployment in Syria. But if development schemes now planned were put in hand urgently and vigorously, (see below) resettlement could probably begin fairly soon.

Sudan: The possibilities of a resettlement scheme are now being studied by the Executive Council. Finance from outside sources would almost certainly be required.

Trans-Arabian Pipeline: There is some possibility that a limited number of refugees may be absorbed by work on the pipe-line. The U. S. Government is understood to be discussing this with the T.A.P. Company.

British Oil Companies: The A.I.O.C., the I.P.C. and the Kuwait Oil Company have been asked to consider whether they can employ any numbers of refugees. They are unlikely to be able to absorb more than a small number.

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(b) Long-term

Transjordan: Outline plans already exist for a major irrigation scheme in the Jordan Valley. It is estimated that this scheme, if pressed ahead vigorously, could provide settlement for about 100,000 people in four or five years time. In addition, there are possible lone-term projects for road construction, port development etc. Finance would, however, have to be made available from outside sources. The total cost of the works was estimated in 1938, at £ 2,600,000 and would probably now be double this figure.

Syria: There are estimated to be about 1 3/4 million acres of cultivable waste land in the Jezira area in Syria. The land is rainfed and requires only men and machinery to get it into production. As a very rough estimate, this area might absorb 200,000 refugees. Its development, however, will depend largely on the development of road and rail communications, which is provided for the Syrian Government's new Five-Year Plan. The Syrian Government will certainly require financial help from outside sources to carry out this Plan.

Iraq: If work on the plans which have been prepared for irrigation development in the Euphrates valley proceeds according to plan, irrigated land should begin to become available for settlement in about two years' time. The first stage of these plans should provide for irrigation of about 2 million acres at a cost of £ 2 m. This could provide for the settlement of up to 500,000 people. The long-term economic possibilities of absorption in any other Middle East country are considered to be slight.